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ABSTRACT

Although the failure of open education experiments are often attributed to declining reading and mathematics scores, overwheming class sizes, and practical difficulties in implementing theory, the examination of a particular open education program in a suburban New York school district points to other possible reasons for the program's failure. First, while it may have been wise to examine other schools for worthwhile ideas, it was probably unwise to have tried to adopt a program from another community without taking considerable time to adapt it to their own. Second, whenever teachers feel that specific conditions of an experimental program are untenable from the outset, as they did in the project reported here, it is unlikely that they will be able to concentrate their efforts on the important curricular changes to be tested. Third, the inservice course offered this particular group should have been tailored to the needs of the staff. Fourth, it was never clear if all the teachers wanted to be involved. If the project outlined in this paper can serve as an example, it is quite possible that many so-called open education projects have been truncated for reasons quite apart from the problems involved in implementing open education practices. (Author/RLV)

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OPEN EDUCATION EXPERIMENTS: WHAT REALLY CAUSES THEM TO FAIL?

"Suburban Schools Are Evolving Basic Curriculums Geared to 70's."[1] This headline recently graced the front page of The New York Times. Its accompanying article cited area schools in retreat from their late 1960's experiments in open education, inferring that the principal reasons for turning back were declining reading and mathematics achievement test scores, overwhelming class size in open programs and practical difficulties in implementing the theory. Certainly, these problems might easily spell the end to innovative programs but, if one were to probe deeper into causes, other factors, even more basic ones, might be discovered at the roots of failure. Heckinger has suggested, for example, that teachers involved in innovative projects may never have been convinced of the values of the very programs they were charged to develop or been adequately prepared to carry them out.[2]

Even if open education is not the real culprit, it is currently at the mercy of the so-called "back-to-basics" trend. It may, therefore, follow the course of other similar innovations of the past and the forces opposing change will, once, again, succeed in intercepting a process by which our schools might have become more humanistic places for "whole" children to learn and grow. Yet, perhaps ther survives a small cadre of educators who believe in the philosophical principles upon which open and informal teaching practices are based. If so, it remains to be

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seen if that group is sufficiently tenacious to weather the present regressive tendencies of the educational community.

Has open education really failed or has it only received the blame for programs developed in its name? In search of an answer to this question, the history of one innovative early childhood project in open education will be related along with several reasons for its failure, causes which clearly are not be attributable to the principles and practices of open education. It is anticipated that, at least in some respects, the reasons for the collapse of this particular program will ring familiar to others.

Several years ago, the spirit of change permeated a small, suburban school district in the New York Metropolitan Area and over the next three years, educators in the area took notice as an early childhood open education experiment was launched. The local school board had charged its newly-appointed administrator to complete an assessment of the district's entire educational program and practices; early in that process, aspects of its primary program were flagged for renewal. In order to develop plans for renovating kindergarten and first grade education in the district, assistance was asked of other administrators, members of the teaching staff and parents. Although the faculty was not overtly opposed to making changes, it became apparent that they were generally contented with the primary grades as they were and little enthusiasm was arroused in the project. As a whole, parents were also satisfied but, in the past, had always shown their willingness to accept program changes if they were

convinced that the resulting program would improve education for their children.

During the early part of the school year, teachers, principals and parent groups visited schools throughout the metropolitan area and nearby states to search for instructional models which might be emulated or adopted. After many observations, much discussion and debate, an early childhood program from another state was designated as the district's model for change. Subsequently, plans were drawn to pilot an interage program in the kindergarten and first grades at one of the system's elementary schools. A quasi-Montessori philosophy provided the fundamental structure of the pilot program. Children were to be given a great deal of choice in selecting learning activities from a great array of materials and centers of interest similar to those which might be found in the infant schools of England. To round out this open education model, a humanistic approach would emphasize the development of children's intellectual abilities and instruction was to be geared away from static groups and oriented more toward individual children and temporary or ad hoc groups.

Countless public planning and information sessions followed. With the assistance of several outside consultants, the parents, teachers and district's administrative staff participated jointly in all preparations. Because there was representation from so many groups, the potential for success might might have been quite promissing. However, other factors complicated the viability of such a prediction.

The Pilot program became shaped, almost immediately, by a new building addition which was under construction at the pilot school. The addition was to be an open-plan facility with three large open-space classrooms. Each room would accommodate 70 to 80 children. An administrative decision to use those particular classrooms for the pilot program meant that it must be tailored to fit in that building; each class would need to be very large and, therefore, have more than one teacher.

The faculty wanted to begin small and expressed fear of piloting the proposed new program with so many children in large open-space rooms. Neither were they pleased about working in teams for the initial stages of the project.

The selection and education of the staff got off to an uneven start. In a sense, the teachers involved had volunteered. Kindergarten and first grade teachers who had been teaching at the pilot school were given the first opportunity to participate in the experiment. They had been told, however, that if they did not wish to do so, it might be necessary to ask them to exchange places with others in the district who did. No one refused and, initially, everyone appeared to be committed. It is possible that some participated only to avoid the possibility of a transfer. Nevertheless, once they had agreed to join the project, the teachers amicably grouped themselves into teams of three; each team, a well-balanced group of kindergarten and first grade teachers, was provided the assistance of two paraprofessionals.

In order to equip the teams with skills and information

demanded by the new program, an inservice course was offered. The course was an abbreviated version of one that the instructors had developed for teachers in their out-of-state model. Teachers were paid to attend the course but most of them were unhappy about having to do so in the late afternoon hours when it was scheduled. Many of the course sessions disappointed both the teachers and their instructors because attempts to encourage the staff to concentrate on the underlying purposes for modifying their methods and to enlist their help in working through the many problems associated with any changes were, again and again, diverted to the teachers' overwhelming concerns about the size of the pilot classes and use of an open-space facility.

Additional help was provided during the training period; a coordinator was appointed from within the school district to assist the administration and staff and on-site services were provided by the same outside consultants who were responsible for the inservice course. In retrospect, it is likely that neither the course or the supplemental services were of much help in convincing the teachers that the program might be successful. It is even uncertain if the teachers felt much responsibility for it.

Late in August, a final effort was made to familiarize the faculty with major elements of the new program. At that time, each team of teachers and paraprofessionals participated in an intensive week-long workshop as they prepared their classrooms for the beginning weeks of school. By that time, it had become certain that construction on the open-space wing would not be

completed for the opening of school in September and that the project would have to be launched, instead, in gymnasiums.

For nearly three months, each team worked with 75 to 80 kindergarten and first grade children in those large, accoustically untreated areas. To make matters worse, two of the teams worked side-by-side in the same large gym. In those critical early weeks, teachers worked very hard but their plans seemed to lack clarity and structure. Sensing their teachers' uncertainty, the children responded with predictable random behavior and excessive noise. At the most chaotic times, the teachers would often huddle together in groups to vent their disappointment and helpless feelings. Their usual good judgment seemed to fail them at those frustrating times.

Viable routines emerged very slowly. Only after the classes moved to their completed open-space classrooms in late fall did the teachers discover ways to cope with some of the problems associated with the new program. By spring, the pilot program had received praise by a continuous flow of visitors from the metropolitan area. The staff failed to share in this enthusiasm or optimism and, with energies depleated, felt assured, more than ever, that their initial intuitions about large classes in open-space had been justified apprehensions.

At the end of its first year, the program was evaluated. Standardized achievement test scores had fallen below levels expected in that system and, even though the differences did not reach statistical significance, those results spelled the beginning

of the project's end.

Two years later, the program was essentially abandoned. The administrator responsible for introducing it had left the system; parent and staff resistance was ever-present and it was clear that many teachers felt their new administrator might not choose to continue it. At any rate, little enthusiasm remained to thrust the pilot program toward its intended goals. The incoming administrator continued the program and even extended it to other schools in the district during the two year period but, realizing the extent of staff opposition, board and community resistance, he moved rapidly toward termination. Thus, the open education experiment, as it had originally been proposed, never was completed.

While it lasted, the pilot program was assessed each year. One would find it difficult to label the pilot a well-developed program consistent with open education theory and practice but evaluations of what did emerge pointed to failure; prestigious achievement test scores had failed to soar and neither the community or the board of education could seriously be motivated to look for attitudinal or important affective changes. When the program was officially terminated, its demise hit the local newspapers, spreading the message that "open education" had flopped in the very community which had served the area as an exemplary model for over three years.

Several reasons for this program's failure are rather clear. If it is possible to learn from our past mistakes, perhaps knowing them will help others who attempt educational innovations in the

future. First, it may be quite wise to observe and examine other schools for stimulating and worthwhile ideas but it was probably unwise for this particular school system to have tried to adopt a program from another community without taking considerable time to adapt it to theirs. Something was lost in the transplanting. Berman and McLaughlin offer good advice when they suggest that

> . . .in order to implement significant innovations, there must be a process of mutual adaptation. The initial design of an innovative project must be adapted to the particular organizational setting of the school, classroom, or other institutional hosts, and, at the same time, the organization and its members must adapt to the demands of the project.[3]

Regardless of the inspirational source, teachers who will ultimately become responsible for piloting changes need to consider and come to agreement about specific changes to be tested in their classrooms. Only modifications teachers feel are important will receive fair trials.

Second, whenever teachers feel that specific conditions of an experimental program are untenable from the outset, as they did in the project reported here, it is unlikely that they will be able to concentrate their efforts on the important curricular changes to be tested. Teachers should, therefore, be intimately involved in such critical decisions as class size and instructional facilities in programs for which they will be responsible. Certainly, building programs should not dictate in these matters.

Third, the inservice course offered this particular group

should have been tailored to the needs of the staff. A course, developed in another community for other teachers, cannot be expected to answer needs of teachers in another area.

A fourth factor may have contributed to the failure of this experimental program. It was never clear if all the teachers really wanted to be involved. Failure will be inherent if the teachers responsible for it are not dedicated to making it succeed. Pressure to participate, however subtly disguised, should never be exerted on a reluctant teacher. Only committed staff members will take an active role in selling their proposal to parents; especially those teachers who have won the respect of parents and earned community support for their past teaching efforts will, by their involvement alone, help to dispell parental anxieties about having children take part in an experimental program. Sincerely interested teachers may also reassure reluctant boards of education who hold the purse strings.

In conclusion, one may ask if it has been the principles and practices of open education which have actually caused the failure of programs for which they have been blamed. Surely, if the project outlined above can serve as an example, it is quite possible that other so-called "open education" projects have been truncated for reasons quite apart from the problems involved in implementing open education practices. In the future, whenever empirical evidence fails to support an innovative educational project, let's assure our communities that the project had first developed into what it was proposed to be before it was assessed; let's assure

the educational community that our failures are of what we label them to be. It is an educational injustice to condemn any project in the name of "open education" or any other innovation when, in truth, the project may never have reached completion or may have turned out to be very different from what was originally planned.

Notes

1. The New York Times (June 15, 1977): A1.

2. Fred M. Heckinger, "Where Have All the Innovations Gone?" Today's Education 65 (September/October 1976): 82.

3. Paul Berman and Wallin McLaughlin, "Implementation of Educational Innovation," The Educational Forum 40: 349.